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Solon in Aristotle's School

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Apart from the *Politics* and the *Athenaion Politeia*, Solon makes very few appearances in the surviving works of the Aristotelian corpus. In the *Ethics*, as we might expect, the Solon whom we encounter is the Herodotean Solon, who visited Croesus of Lydia and warned him against premature pride in his achievements: in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle accepts the view that a man cannot be called happy before his death, because before his death his life is not yet complete; but in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he wonders whether it makes sense to ascribe happiness to a man after his death, when the varying fortunes of his descendants may mean that there are times when the dead man is posthumously happy and times when he is not.¹ Later in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he cites Solon in support of his view that happiness results from acting well and that that requires a sufficiency of worldly goods but not an excess: that again can be found in Herodotus' story, and also in fragments from Solon's poems.²

Solon also appears twice in the *Rhetoric*. As one example of an appeal to ancient as opposed to present-day witnesses, Aristotle remarks that (at the end of the fifth century) the demagogue Cleophon quoted against the oligarch Critias a couplet in which Solon rebuked an earlier Critias (Solon's own nephew, and an ancestor of the oligarch).³ In what seems like an awkward addition to instances of wise men's being honored by cities which one might not expect to honor them, we read that the Athenians achieved happiness when they used the laws of Solon and the Spartans when they used the laws of Lycurgus.⁴

Among the works in the Aristotelian corpus which have not survived, the list attributed to Hesychius of Miletus includes (but the shorter lists of Diogenes Laer-

1 Arist. *E. E.* 2.1219b4–8, *E. N.* 1.1100a10–30; cf. Hdt. 1.29–33.

2 Arist. *E. N.* 10.1179a9–13; cf. Hdt. 1.30.4, 31.2, 32.5–6, and Solon frs. 4.9–10, 13.7–76 W².

3 Arist. *Rh.* 1.1375b32–34; cf. Solon fr. 22a W².

4 Arist. *Rh.* 2.1398b17–18.

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tius and Ptolemaeus do not) a study of Solon's *axones* (the monuments on which his laws were inscribed), in five books: I shall return to this below.⁵

That leaves us with the *Politics*, where there are five passages in which Solon is mentioned, and the *Athenaion Politeia*, where there is a substantial section devoted to Solon, and he is mentioned also in a number of later passages, including both of the summaries of Athens' political development. Interestingly, there are some striking agreements between the two works but also some striking disagreements. The first mention in the *Politics* corresponds to nothing in the *Athenaion Politeia*. In book 1 Aristotle says, as he said in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that one does not need unlimited possessions for a good life – “as Solon says in his poetry, ‘no fixed limit to wealth has been established for men’ ” (ὥσπερ Σόλων φησὶ ποιήσας, πλούτου δ’ οὐθὲν τέρμα πεφασμένον ἀνδράσι κεῖται): that is a verse from a long fragment in which Solon's main point is that wealth is desirable but, while men are never satisfied with what they have, unjust wealth sooner or later incurs retribution from Zeus.⁶

The remaining passages in the *Politics* are all concerned with Solon as reformer and legislator. The two most important need to be considered together. In book 2 Solon (like the Spartan Lyscurgus) was both a legislator and a framer of a constitution. Some regard him as a worthwhile legislator, who undid an oligarchy which was “too unmixed” and “established the traditional democracy, mixing the constitution well”. The council of the Areopagos was oligarchic, appointment of officials by election aristocratic and the law courts democratic. Solon did not undo the existing election of council and officials, but established the *dēmos* by opening the courts to all. Some people criticize him for that, because he initiated the process which led through the measures of Ephialtes and Pericles to “the present democracy”; but it is better seen as an accidental sequel than as a consequence of Solon's intention: Solon gave the *dēmos* the minimum necessary power, to elect the officials and hold them to account, while the officials were chosen from the three higher classes and the lowest (the *thētes*) was excluded from office-holding.⁷ Part of that account is repeated in Book 3: there are risks both in giving the *plēthos* a share in political power and in not giving it, so Solon and “some other of the legislators” let it take part in elections and in holding to account, since collectively it can benefit the city but individual members of the *plēthos* cannot judge effectively. What follows makes it clear that Aristotle is

5 [Hsch. Mil.] *Aristotelis Vita Menagiana* (pp. 245–249 Flach), cf. Rose 1886, 9–18 at 16; but absent from the lists of D. L. 5.21–27, cf. Rose 1886, 3–9, and Ptolemaeus, summarized in Rose 1886, 18–22.

6 Arist. *Pol.* 1.1356b31–34, cf. Solon fr. 13.71 W² (cited already above in n. 2).

7 Arist. *Pol.* 2. 1273b32–1274a21.

indeed thinking of appointment by election; and he similarly defends the participation of the *plēthos* in law courts, councils and assemblies.⁸ In Book 4, to demonstrate the superiority of men of middling rank, Aristotle says that the best legislators were of this kind, and his first example is Solon, “which is clear from his poetry” (δηλοῖ δ’ ἐκ τῆς ποιήσεως, 1296a20).⁹

Those passages, as we shall see below, have counterparts in the *Athenaion Politeia*; but there is one other allusion to Solon in the *Politics*, which has no parallel in the *Athenaion Politeia* or indeed anywhere else. Book 2, in a paragraph on measures to equalize property-holding among citizens, mentions a law of Solon and laws “in other places” which prohibit a man from acquiring as much property as he likes.¹⁰ I argue below that it was possible in the fourth century to consult the text of Solon’s laws, so in principle this law could be authentic; and Ruschenbusch in his collection of the fragments accepted it, and linked it with the *seisakhtheia*. However, others have been less confident, and since this law is not mentioned elsewhere, and I suspect that Aristotle did not carefully check all the historical examples in the *Politics*, I join the doubters.¹¹

In the *Athenaion Politeia*, the introduction to the problems with which Solon had to deal focuses particularly on a class of dependent peasants called *hektēmoroi*, and remarks that all men’s loans were on the security of the person until Solon; and (in the course of a reconstruction of the development of the nine archonships, probably based more on fourth-century speculation than on evidence) that it was in the time of Solon that all of the nine archons took to using the *thesmotheteion* as their headquarters.¹²

The section devoted directly to Solon¹³ begins with his background as a man of middling rank, invoking passages from his poems (§5). In fact the fragments quoted show that he criticized both rich and poor, but fail to show that he was himself middling. Then the *seisakhtheia* is treated, as a cancellation of all debts and a ban for the future on enslavement for debt; and the author worries about a story in which Solon leaked his plans to his friends, who borrowed money to buy up land and then did not have to return the borrowed money (§6). Some other debts may have been cancelled, but what we are given is probably in essence an anachronistic misunderstanding of a cancellation of the obligations of the *he-*

⁸ Arist. *Pol.* 3.1281b21–38 (–1282a23).

⁹ Arist. *Pol.* 4. 1296a18–21.

¹⁰ Arist. *Pol.* 2.1266b14–18.

¹¹ Accepted, Ruschenbusch 1966 and Ruschenbusch 2010, F66; rejected, e.g. Harrison 1968/1971, 1.237.

¹² [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 2.2, 3.5. On all the material in that work see Rhodes 1981 ad locc.

¹³ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 5.1–13.2.

ktēmoroi; and for the future Solon seems to have banned only outright enslavement for debt and not the kind of debt bondage which ended when a debt was repaid.¹⁴ Whether Solon himself profited from advance knowledge of his plans is an illusory problem: the whole story is improbable, and seems to have been invented in order to discredit some families prominent at the end of the fifth century.

Athenaion Politeia then proceeds to the laws, where Solon replaced the laws of Draco except those on homicide,¹⁵ and inscribed his new laws on objects called *kurbeis* (7.1–2). Treatment of the constitution begins with the division of the Athenians into four classes based on the produce of their land, as the sole basis for appointment to offices, and continues with the appointment of officials (unlike the *Politics* attributing to Solon a new method of appointing officials in general and the nine archons in particular, which involved two stages of which the first used election but the second allotment), the retention of the old tribes and *naukrariai*, the creation of a new council of four hundred alongside the Areopagos, and a law against neutrality in times of civil strife (7.2–8.5). There are hints that, while the highest class was new, the other three already existed as rough-and-ready categories; and while the *Athenaion Politeia* defines all four in terms of produce it may be that in fact only the highest was so defined and the qualifications for the others were postulated later by false analogy.¹⁶ Underlying Solon's political use of the classes was a desire to provide opportunities for newly enriched families as well as the established ruling families. On Solon's method of appointing the archons the *Athenaion Politeia* is probably to be preferred to the *Politics* (cf. below), though its alleged previous procedure is hard to credit. The council of four hundred and the law against neutrality have both been challenged by some scholars, but both ought to be accepted.

Next a summing-up chapter identifies the three most democratic features of Solon's dispensation – the ban on personal security for debt, the creation of a category of “public” lawsuits, in which any citizen could prosecute, and reference to a body of jurors, primarily but perhaps not solely in appeals against the verdicts of individual magistrates – and like the *Politics* it states that Solon's intention should not be judged from present-day practice (§ 9). Quotations from Solon's poems in § 12 do indeed show that for Solon the *dēmos* had a part to play but only a subordinate part: he was not a champion of democracy as later understood. After this a chapter on measures, weights and coinage seems to interrupt the structure

¹⁴ Cf. Harris 2002 = 2006, 249–269.

¹⁵ That there were laws of Draco on matters other than homicide has often been doubted, but in support see Carey 2013.

¹⁶ See Rhodes 1997, 4, replying to the suggestion of Foxhall 1997 that the three highest classes together constituted a rich minority.

of the whole section on Solon, and is probably derived from a different source from the rest of the section.¹⁷ Solon is credited with establishing new standards of measures of capacity, weights and coinage (§ 10): in fact he perhaps legislated for the use of measures and weights which were already current; coinage was not introduced until later, but since coins were named after the weight of precious metal in them it was easy for later Greeks to suppose that when Solon had dealt with weights he had dealt with coinage also.

The author continues with Solon's departure from Athens for ten years after enacting his laws, to avoid pressure to change them (11.1): the Athenians perhaps undertook to leave his laws unchanged for those ten years rather than for the hundred years alleged in 7.2. Then there are comments on Solon's occupying the middle ground between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, and therefore disappointing both (again with passages from his poems: 11.2–12.5). An account of the transition from Solon to Peisistratos begins with the troubles over the archonship in the years after Solon (13.1–2). These troubles presumably reflect opposition by the old ruling class to Solon's attempt to bring in new leading families. The *Athenaion Politeia* is our only source for this, and its account of the compromise after the illegally-prolonged archonship of Damasias, that for the remainder of the year in which Damasias was ousted there was a special board of ten archons based on three social classes, may be a distorted version of an agreement that in future the short list from which the archons were allotted should comprise equal numbers of men from inside and men from outside the old ruling class.

Solon appears in the two summaries of Athens' constitutional development: in the first, which I believe to be derived from some source, Solon is the first champion of the *dēmos*, after which to the end of the fifth century there is a series of champions of the *dēmos* and of the (variously-labelled) upper class; in the second, which appears to be the author's own compilation, Solon's is one of a numbered series of "changes" (with Draco probably inserted before him though he was originally absent), "from which the beginning of democracy occurred".¹⁸ Beyond that, there are references to his opposing Peisistratos, a chronological argument (which seems unsound) that he could not have been a lover of Peisistratos, a remark that Cleisthenes' dispensation was "much more democratic" than Solon's, and that Solon's laws were not used under the tyranny, to be contrasted with a later remark that Cleisthenes' constitution was "not demotic but very much like Solon's"; in 404/3 the Thirty early in their rule "demolished those of Solon's institutes which contained scope for dispute, and undid the power which

¹⁷ Cf. Rhodes 1981, 46–47, 54.

¹⁸ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 28 at 28.2, 41.1–2 at 41. 2.

resided in the *dikastai*".¹⁹ That they modified Solonian and later laws which they found uncongenial should be accepted (they are known to have demolished *stēlai* containing some recent decrees), but it is hard to believe that they physically modified or destroyed Solon's *kurbeis*. In the second part of the treatise, on the working of the constitution in the author's own time, we read that the treasurers of Athena are appointed by lot one from each tribe, from the *pentakosiomedimnoi* (the highest of the four classes) in accordance with Solon's law (which is still valid).²⁰

There are some striking agreements between the two accounts: that Solon is shown by his poetry to have been of middling rank; that he based official appointments on the four classes and men of the lowest class were not allowed to hold any offices (but the *Politics* wrongly makes the *zeugitai* the second class from the top and the *hippeis* the third); that law courts open to all the citizens were one of the democratic features of Solon's dispensation, but Solon should not be assumed to have intended the fifth-century democracy which was built on his foundations. On the other hand, there is one conspicuous disagreement: in the *Politics* Solon did not disturb the council of the Areopagos and elected officials, whereas in the *Athenaion Politeia* an old system which appears to have involved the appointment of the archons by the Areopagos after interviews is replaced by allotment from an elected short list.²¹

Ever since the London papyrus of the *Athenaion Politeia* was found and published, these facts have prompted important questions, on which there is not yet a consensus: from what source or sources did the *Politics* and the *Athenaion Politeia* derive their information? On the point on which they disagree, which is the more likely to be right? And does the partly coinciding but partly conflicting treatment of Solon in the two works indicate that both are by Aristotle, or should we rather think that the *Athenaion Politeia* is not? Regardless of authorship, the *Athenaion Politeia* appears to be the later of the two works: the latest datable reference in the *Politics* is to the assassination of Philip II of Macedon, in 336 BCE;²² but the

¹⁹ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 14.2, 17.2–3, 22.1 (but elsewhere Peisistratos did abide by the existing laws: e.g. 13); 29.3; 35.2: see Rhodes 1981 ad locc.

²⁰ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 47.1, cf. 8. 1: see Rhodes 1981 ad locc. There cannot in the time of Solon have been a board of ten, one from each tribe, since the ten tribes did not yet exist.

²¹ In [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 8.1–2 each tribe produced ten candidates in the first stage; later (but we do not know when) allotment came to be used for the first stage as well as the second. If there were already ten short-listed candidates per tribe in the first stage, when the ten tribes did not yet exist (cf. above, n. 17), the change to the ten tribes will have greatly increased the size of the short list.

²² Arist. *Pol.* 5.1311b1–3.

Athenaion Politeia as we have it was originally completed after 333/332 BCE and revised between 329/328 BCE and 325/324 BCE.²³

In antiquity all the *Politeiai* and a great many other works were attributed to Aristotle, on a scale which makes it inconceivable that he should have written all of them himself. The agreements between the *Politics* and the *Athenaion Politeia* on Solon, together with the *Athenaion Politeia*'s dates of composition and revision, confirm that the latter was at any rate a product of Aristotle's school; but (while the different nature of the work makes it unsurprising that it is unlike the other surviving works of the corpus) in the *Athenaion Politeia* as a whole there are remarkably few passages with a strongly Aristotelian flavor, and many characteristic Aristotelian expressions which we might have expected to find are absent. Though Aristotle was working in Athens at the time when the *Athenaion Politeia* was written, he was not an Athenian and was not a lover of democracy: the Athenian is the only one of the 158 *Politeiai* which survives, but there is no particular reason why Aristotle should have written it himself, and I think it more likely that he did not.²⁴

What is the basis for the statements about Solon in the two works? There is a substantial overlap between what the *Athenaion Politeia* says about Solon, and about what preceded his reforms, and Plutarch's *Solon*: Plutarch does indeed cite "Aristotle" among his sources,²⁵ but each work has some material which the other lacks, so that it is likely that, while Plutarch did make some direct use of the *Athenaion Politeia*, there is also a common source, on Solon and what preceded his reforms, behind the two accounts. Both accounts include quotations from Solon's poems, and also quotations from Solon's laws, and probably they were provided by that common source.²⁶ Whether Solon's laws were still available for consultation in the fourth century continues to be disputed, in the light of the tendency of fourth-century Athenians to attribute all their current laws to Draco and Solon, even those which could easily be seen to be later. However, the *Athenaion Politeia* quotes "laws of Solon which they no longer use" (οἷς οὐκέτι χρῶνται), and Plutarch quotes numbered laws from numbered *axones*;²⁷ we have seen that the works attributed to "Aristotle" included one in five books on Solon's *axones*; there is good reason to think that those who wanted to find out what were the

²³ Cf. Rhodes 1981, 51–58.

²⁴ Cf. Rhodes 1981, 39–40, 61–63.

²⁵ Plut. *Sol.* 25.1 cites [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 7.1.

²⁶ Cf. Rhodes 1981, 83–84, 88, 118–119, 124.

²⁷ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 8.3; Plut. *Sol.* 19.4, 23. 4, 24.2 (and there are some references to numbered *axones* in other texts).

laws of Solon were able to do so.²⁸ Therefore, although the author of the *Athenaion Politeia* was probably not Aristotle himself, on Solon he was using a detailed and well-informed source and deserves to be taken seriously. (He may, however, be less reliable on Athens before Solon, since there could well have been a tendency to assume that Solon changed everything and that post-Solonian practice always differed from pre-Solonian.)

The *Politics* is a work of theory supported by a large number of particular examples from the history of particular states: some of the examples will have been well known and some not, some will have been easily verifiable and some not. In putting together a work of this kind Aristotle may well have included what he thought he knew, without being able and / or without taking the trouble to check each of them. (We have seen above that the *Politics* has Athens' four classes in the wrong order.) It therefore seems to me that, when the *Politics*, with its assortment of examples, and the *Athenaion Politeia*, following a detailed source which had access to Solon's poems and laws, disagree on the appointment of officials in Solon's dispensation, the *Athenaion Politeia* is the more likely to be right.

Other chapters in this book enable us to work out the background against which the Solon of Aristotle's school should be seen.²⁹ For Herodotus Solon was a sage, a lawgiver and a poet, but not a constitutional or economic reformer; Thucydides does not mention Solon at all. However, in Athens' political conflicts at the end of the fifth century there was argument about what was Athens' *patrios politeia* (traditional constitution), in which men occupying different political positions claimed that the *patrios politeia* was the kind of constitution which they wanted.³⁰ The argument was finally won by the democrats: the restored democracy of 403 BCE was said to be based on the institutes of Draco and the laws of Solon,³¹ and that helps us to understand why fourth-century Athenians were capable of attributing any of their current laws to Solon.

Acceptance of the democracy became fundamental for everybody engaged in politics in the fourth century; but it became possible in the fourth century as it had not been in the fifth to suggest, without calling for the overthrow of the democracy, that things might be better than in the current dispensation and indeed had been better earlier, and so the nature of the Solonian dispensation continued in the fourth century to be a matter for debate. Isocrates in his *Areopagitic* claimed that the democracy of the present day had been corrupted from that of the ancestors, which was established by Solon and re-established after

²⁸ Cf. Rhodes 1981, 131–135; Rhodes 2006.

²⁹ See in particular Carey's and Morgan's chapters.

³⁰ Cf. especially Fuks 1953; Rhodes 2011, 16–28.

³¹ And. 1.81–85, cf. Lys. 6.8, 30.2, 17–21.

the tyranny by Cleisthenes; what he wanted was not an oligarchic revolution but the *patria dioikēsis* (traditional administration).³² (On other occasions he pushed back the origins of the better kind of democracy even further, to the legendary Theseus³³). Another presentation of a moderate Solon can be seen in the attempt by the Atthidographer Androtion, about the middle of the fourth century, to argue that Solon's *seisakhtheia* involved not an outright cancellation of debts, as maintained by the *Athenaion Politeia* and Plutarch, a measure which in the fourth century tended to be associated with dangerous revolutionaries, but simply a juggling with the currency to reduce the amounts which debtors had to repay.³⁴

Plato's Solon, however, had been much less political: as for Herodotus he was a sage, a lawgiver and a poet; the *Hippias Maior* mentions the possibility of reciting a list of Athenian archons from Solon onwards;³⁵ but the only approach to the political Solon of the *Politics* and the *Athenaion Politeia* is the remark in the *Timaeus* that he was distracted from poetry by the need to attend to Athens' political troubles.³⁶ But that is not a peculiarity in Plato's treatment of Solon: he has no mention of Cylon, Draco, Cleisthenes or Ephialtes; the Peisistratidai are mentioned only for the personal motive of Aristogeiton and Harmodius in attacking them.³⁷ (*Hipparchus* is generally considered not to be by Plato: Hipparchus is introduced primarily for his poetic interests and his maxims, but we read that he was Peisistratos' eldest son, the tyranny was like the age of Cronus until Hipparchus was killed and became harsh only under Hippias after that, and a new motive is invented for the hostility of Aristogeiton and Harmodius.³⁸) Miltiades, Cimon, Themistocles, Aristides and Pericles are mentioned by Plato; and, inevitably because of his link with Socrates, Alcibiades. The emphasis is on the personal rather than the political, but one reference to Pericles includes, as a source of corruption, his introduction of stipends for civilian service.³⁹ There is no mention of the demagogues Cleon, Hyperbolus and Cleophon. Not only with Solon but in general Plato was not interested in the kind of political history which did interest Aristotle and his school.

³² Isoc. 7.15–17, 56–78; cf. 15.232–236. See also Carey in this volume, pp. 114–116.

³³ Isoc. 12. 113–155; cf. 10.32–37. See Rhodes 2014; and for a somewhat rigid view of who was regarded as the founder of the democracy when see Ruschenbusch 1958.

³⁴ Androt. *FGrH* 324 F 34 ap. Plut. *Sol.* 15.3–4, contr. [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 6.1, Plut. *Sol.* 15.2–5 (rejecting Androtion's view).

³⁵ Pl. *Hp. Ma.* 285e. On Solon in Plato see Morgan in this volume.

³⁶ Pl. *Ti.* 21c–d.

³⁷ Pl. *Smp.* 182c.

³⁸ [Pl.] Hipparch. 228b–229b; contrast Thuc. 1.20.2, 6.54–59, [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 17–19, and for differing views of when the tyranny degenerated see Rhodes 1981, 218.

³⁹ Pl. *Grg.* 515e.

The Solon of the *Ethics* and the *Rhetoric* is part of the Athenians', and the Greeks', common knowledge. The political Solon of the *Politics* and the *Athenaion Politeia*, while securely grounded in Solon's poems and his laws, first attracted interest in the political debates at the end of the fifth century, and continued to attract interest in the differently-focused political debates of the fourth century. That is what underlies the interest taken by Aristotle and his school, who were taking sides in a current debate when they argued that Solon should not be regarded as the creator of the contemporary democracy but did not intend or foresee what came to be built on his foundations.